

SUICIDE AND SIBLING POSITION

DAVID LESTER¹

Suicide Prevention and Crisis Service, Buffalo, New York

According to Adler (2) the dynamics of suicide are similar to those of any mental disorder, and first borns and last borns are most often found among patients. From this we derive the hypothesis that among suicides also, first borns and last borns prevail, compared to the other sibling positions.

In an earlier paper (9) we noted one study on completed suicides which did not support the hypothesis (6), one on attempted suicides which had too few subjects for a reliable conclusion (8), and a third study which did support the hypothesis (13).

The purpose of the present note is to summarize the relevant studies that have appeared since. None of these focused on sibling relationship but incidentally included pertinent data.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Completed suicide. Paffenbarger and Asnes (10) in a follow-up study of male college students found confirmation for the results of Kallman et al. (6) of no difference in sibling position between those who committed suicide and those who did not.

On the other hand, Jan-Tausch (5) found among school children who had committed suicide a significant excess of first borns over middle and last borns. Ritson (11) found in a small sample of alcoholics who had committed suicide a significant excess of last borns, compared to a small sample of non-suicidal alcoholics.

Attempted suicide. Two studies reported an excess of first borns in attempted suicides: Rosenberg and Latimer (12) in children, and Tucker and Reinhardt (14) in military men. Two studies reported an excess of last borns: Koller and Castanos (7) in male prisoners, and Vinoda (15) in female psychiatric patients. Actually, Vinoda reported a deficit in first borns and an excess of later borns in his sample of attempted suicides as compared to a nonsuicidal nondisturbed control group.

One study previously reported (13) indicated an excess of first and last borns among adolescents who had attempted suicide.

¹Author's address: 560 Main Street, Suite 405, Buffalo, N. Y. 14202.

Finally one study (1) reported no significant association between suicidal behavior and sibling position among adults who had taken overdoses of drugs, and in another study among children and adolescents (4) there were too few subjects to permit a reliable conclusion.

DISCUSSION

In spite of considerable inconsistency of results, none of the studies shows an excess of middle borns among suicidal individuals. Whether first borns or last borns will be in excess appears to be affected by age, sex of the subject, degree of psychological disturbance, alcoholism, criminality, etc. Number of siblings (3, 7, 11, 15) or sex of siblings (5) per se does not seem to be related to suicidal behavior, yet may be related in combination with sibling position.

In summary the scanty data existing so far offer some support for the Adlerian hypothesis of greater frequency of suicidal behavior among first borns or last borns as compared to middle borns.

REFERENCES

1. ACHTE, K. A., & GINMAN, L. Suicide attempts with narcotics and poisons. *Acta Psychiat. Scand.*, 1966, 42, 214-232.
2. ANSBACHER, H. L., & ANSBACHER, ROWENA R. (Eds.) *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler*. New York: Basic Books, 1956.
3. FARBEROW, N. L. Personality patterns of suicidal mental hospital patients. *Genet. Psychol. Monogr.*, 1950, 42 (1).
4. HALDANE, J. D., & HAIDER, I. Attempted suicide in children and adolescents. *Brit. J. clin. Pract.*, 1967, 21, 587-591.
5. JAN-TAUSCH, J. *Suicide of children 1960-1963*. Trenton, N. J.: Department of Education, 1963.
6. KALLMAN, F. J., DE PORTE, J., DE PORTE, E., & FEINGOLD, L. Suicide in twins and only children. *Amer. J. hum. Genet.*, 1949, 1, 113-126.
7. KOLLER, K. M., & CASTANOS, J. N. Parental deprivation and attempted suicide in prison populations. *Med. J. Austral.*, 1969, 1, 858-861.
8. LAWLER, R. H., NAKIELNY, W., & WRIGHT, N. A. Suicide attempts in children. *Canada. Med. Ass. J.*, 1963, 89, 751-754.
9. LESTER, D. Sibling position and suicidal behavior. *J. Individ. Psychol.*, 1966, 22, 204-207.
10. PAFFENBARGER, R. S., & ASNES, D. P. Chronic disease in former college students. *Amer. J. pub. Health*, 1966, 56, 1026-1036.
11. RITSON, E. B. Suicide among alcoholics. *Brit. J. med. Psychol.*, 1968, 41, 235-242.
12. ROSENBERG, P. H., & LATIMER, R. Suicide attempts by children. *Ment. Hyg.*, 1966, 50, 354-359.
13. TOOLAN, J. M. Suicide and suicide attempts in children and adolescents. *Amer. J. Psychiat.*, 1962, 118, 719-724.
14. TUCKER, G. J., & REINHARDT, R. F. Suicide attempts. U. S. Naval Aerospace Medical Institute, 1966, NAM 1-975.
15. VINODA, K. S. Personality characteristics of attempted suicides. *Brit. J. Psychiat.*, 1966, 112, 1143-1150.